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STATEMENT BY H.E. AMBASSADOR LAURENCE N. EDWARDS
HEAD OF DELEGATION OF THE REPUBLIC OF THE MARSHALL ISLANDS
TO THE WORLD FOOD SUMMIT

November 14, 1996Please check against delivery

Thank you Mr. President,

It is a great honor for me to congratulate you on your election to serve as the President for this great event. On behalf of the President of the Republic of the Marshall Islands we wholeheartedly thank the Italian Government and People for their generous hospitality, and also to thank the FAO for the excellent preparations.

Mr. President, the provision of a safe and nutritious diet to all peoples is a prime concern for all countries. We all accept the moral obligation to alleviate starvation and to do our best to prevent nutritional diseases at the national level. But for my country this whole situation is made much more difficult due to the high levels of radiation contamination that has been left behind from the Trusteeship period. This is why the Marshall Islands has reported to the General Assembly that the South Pacific Forum once again reaffirmed the existence of a special responsibility toward those peoples of the former United Nations Trust Territories administered by the United States, the Marshall Islands, who had been adversely affected as a result of nuclear weapons tests conducted during the period of the Trusteeship.

Mr. President, this responsibility includes safe resettlement of displaced human populations and the restoration to economic productivity of affected areas. As you know, Mr. President, this is a matter of extreme importance to the Marshall Islands and we are very concerned that urgent progress needs to be made. The acknowledged role of the international community is now being given a presence in the Marshall Islands by the visiting mission of the IAEA. The mission met with H.E. President Amata Kabua to give him a complete briefing on the scope and nature of the agency's visit to the Marshall Islands. My government welcomes this open and transparent manner of the agency in conducting its work, as it ensures that there are no false expectations on either side.

Mr. President, I can assure you that we have made sure that the limited facilities we could provide were extended to the fullest to accommodate the agency. We made sure that the agency had access to all the damaged nuclear weapons test sites in the Marshall Islands, as well as the current storage site at Runit Island. This is merely a concrete dome covering a large amount of top soil scraped off some of the test sites. The dome has not been monitored for a very long time, and we are concerned about the safety of this site. We feel that the agency, as part of its work with the Marshall Islands will be able to give us better information upon which to plan our future responses to this site.

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Mr. President, the results of this nuclear contamination has had a number of effects on the people and on our subsistence agriculture. Many of the agricultural products which we rely on have been seriously affected. For example, the arrow-root which used to grow on many of the contaminated islands, has now died out. In most of the other islands this particular plant species no longer bears any edible fruits. There have also been effects on our lagoon fisheries. Many species that were considered edible have at times become poisonous to eat. The symptoms resulting from eating this type of poisoned fish - nausea, vomiting, fever and diarrhea - these have also been documented in French Polynesia after tests there. We can not escape the strong evidence that there is a link from these problems to the testing itself.

We also know that the staple foods which grow in our country are like sponges for any minerals or nutrients. In this regard we have been advised by many experts on the use of potassium as a way to inhibit uptake of radioactive cesium. But as delegations can all imagine this is a very expensive process for a small country like mine to undertake. We are hopeful that this Summit will galvanize international support for concrete action-oriented proposals such as this. This could be of great benefit for us. Which leads me to the concept of poor soil agriculture, and I would like to elaborate a little bit on the need for expanded research into this important field. In the Marshall Islands we have mainly coral sand soil, which is not the most productive soil there is. Nevertheless, we have been able to survive on the meager fruits that it would yield for thousands of years. But in the new world economy we need to look into new ways of utilization and how to improve the use of our soil. In this regard we hope that this Summit will indeed produce some valuable results for us, so that existing research can be made available, and further work can be encouraged.

Mr. President, I do wish to raise a concern about the process which has led us to this Summit. When the United Nations General Assembly unanimously agreed to the convening of this summit last year at the 50th session, we were given assurances that those small delegations without representation in Rome would be assisted with attendance at the Preparatory Meetings and the Summit itself. We are grateful for the assistance to be here today. But the crucial negotiations which occurred in the months before - we were not privy to these important discussions. It is of great concern that we may have been presented with a document produced by FAO insiders and special interests represented here in Rome. It has not been a transparent process.

This being said, my delegation does find much merit in the paper which was agreed to by these experts on October 31st, which is now before us. There are many aspects relating to food security for all, which we feel are extremely important. Recognition of the influence which more equitable export conditions from developing countries to developed countries can have on overall improvements in food security is also a welcome development. It is therefore the intention of my delegation to support the adoption of this Summit Declaration, and we hope to work closely with interested delegations and the United Nations agencies, especially the FAO. I can assure you, Mr. President, that the Government of the Marshall Islands will place high priority on the implementation of this agreement. I thank you Mr. President.